

Testimony of Beth McCullough
Homeless Education Liaison-Adrian Public Schools

House Committee on Banking and Financial Services
The Joint State-Federal Servicing/Foreclosure Settlement

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I have come to understand that working with homeless youth is not just my job but our job. When people understand what is happening to these students, they want to help. They want to make a difference and they do.

I have been the Homeless Education Liaison for Adrian Public Schools since the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act. I have also been the Homeless Education Grant Coordinator for Lenawee County since 2005. The McKinney-Vento grant is one of many that come from the federal government to Michigan Department of Education and then out to the schools. About 80% of our schools in Michigan have access to McKinney-Vento grant funds, small though they are – last year, the state received \$2.3 million in federal funds.

Last week I worked with a family who had 6 children in school. The house they had been renting was foreclosed on, not because the family didn't pay the rent, but because the Landlord stopped paying the bank. Our shelters were full so various friends and relatives of the family took in the kids. The family was spread throughout three school districts and I was able to give gas cards to the adults driving the students back to their schools. One student said, "I lost my blanket, but I kept my school."

Last year The State of Michigan identified and served 31,554 homeless students in our schools. That is a 42% increase from the previous year but our state allocation for homeless education this year was \$75,230 less than our state allocation in the 2008-2009 school year. The gas cards I gave the family last week came from those same federal funds, which also help with tutors for homeless students, school supplies and staff to conduct the intense casework some of these families need

If we consider the recession an earthquake that shifted so much in Michigan, we are now seeing the Tsunami of homelessness as so many of our residents fall one rung lower on the poverty ladder, and the people holding on to the last rung have fallen into homelessness.

Although most of our students are homeless because their whole family is homeless, some students are homeless and on their own. Many of the students sleep on different couches every night. Out of the 31,000 homeless students in Michigan, 3,543 were unaccompanied youth, the name the McKinney-Vento Act gives for students who are homeless and not living with a parent or guardian. These students, typically 17 years old, could drop out of school – in fact, research tells us that homeless students are more likely than poor, housed students to drop out of school. But in my community, homeless students do not drop out. These students will tell you "I have to graduate. I have to go to college. This is my only way out. This is the only way to do better than what my Mom could do for me."

Several years ago I met a woman who had taken in a homeless unaccompanied youth. She told me "Every year I take in a foreign exchange student, and this year she was from Palmyra." Palmyra is a bend in the road between Adrian and Blissfield in Lenawee County. Her statement stopped me in my tracks. I thought "Can we do that?? Can we start a foreign exchange program but instead of taking in students from France, a host family would take in a homeless student?"

A coalition of youth serving agencies came together to form the "Roadmap to Graduation" program. Catholic Charities stepped forward to assist in finding homes and became the fiscal agent. They also had the experience of working in foster care and knew some of the issues we would encounter when placing a student in a host home. Dochas II, a counseling agency that has the local contract for Runaway and Homeless Youth Program became a partner for casework and as the Homeless Education Coordinator I monitor educational issues. This was no longer just my job but our job. Our community came together to be the difference these students need.

In our 6 years of operation, **every student in the Roadmap to Graduation Program has graduated.** 87% have gone on to higher education. We have had two valedictorians as well as students with special education needs. At least five of our students have slept outside while they were homeless and two of them stayed in foreclosed homes with no water, electric or gas. One student asked if we could just find him a port-a-potty. We found him a home. His attendance immediately improved. He even played varsity football and track his senior year. I didn't know what compression shorts were until I took this job. Of course I was able to buy him what he needed because this isn't just my job, it became our job. Churches, service clubs, teachers, coaches and other families came forward to help, not just this one student but all of the 603 homeless students I assisted last year. The custodians even held an open house for one of our homeless graduating seniors.

I met a student about a month ago who asked to be in the Roadmap to Graduation Program. He has another year to go in high school. His mother moved in with a friend of hers and there is no room for this student, who came to us asking for food since he had not eaten for days. He doesn't play football but he plays a beautiful viola. He needs a Roadmap to Graduation, and he needs you to know that.